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The World Without Us

Gary Fincke

My wife, Kathleen, designs coats for the cancer stricken. Something comfortable, she says, for the unfortunate to wear during chemotherapy sessions. When a reporter interviewed her for the local paper two months ago, her friend Annie modeled them for the photo the paper ran with the article. Despite her diagnosis, Annie looked healthy. She gave a remission smile. The reporter allowed Kathleen to post the unused photos on her web site that features a video made at the chemo center. Annie sits among several other patients and says a few lines about how the coat is warm but not bulky, that it somehow feels natural to be wearing one indoors. The other patients had given permission to have their identities as cancer patients revealed.

Maybe not so surprising, Annie's willingness to promote. Even under her circumstances, she's a go-getter, smoothing the way with the other patients, one of whom bought a coat on the spot. But the first thing I noticed when I

watched the video was the patient who looked to be in her 20s, a beauty who, Kathleen said, had just been told she had a brain tumor after a year of being treated for migraines. What I didn't tell Kathleen was I think there's cooperation from the patients because my wife, like me, is nearly seventy, and maybe those patients aren't put off by someone with a limited future.

I used to tell her we're all balloons in that old carnival dart game, even if we're underinflated and way up in the corner, the balloons nobody aims at. "You're always so downbeat," she'd say. "All you have are conditions that are monitored like anybody our age. Arthritis, cataracts, skin cancer, a couple of kidney stones. All that adds up to is nothing but maintenance."

There's truth in that, for certain, because she's the one who is dying, though not of cancer, not the horror she'd conditioned herself to accept when it arrived. All those coats. All those patients, especially the ones who were younger than herself. They had been enough to show her inevitability and the best ways to deal with it.

But here, with last month's diagnosis of oncoming dementia, there isn't any operation or chemo or hair loss; there's only each day more confusing than the last, the increments so tiny she won't even notice them until some accident or embarrassment announces the advance of damage. For now, the evidence is

private, the sticky notes reminding her of things a child would do automatically. The careful arranging of medicines. The calendar thick with events that are annotated with explanations.

She wants to go on trips. New places are good for the brain, she says. We'll start with places close by until we agree on a faraway place we both want to go to. She has promised herself not to be bitter.

§

We started with the Holocaust Museum, a couple hundred miles to drive, and neither of us ever there all these years. I told her not to turn Siri on like she does now for just about any place but where we can walk to, and she fidgeted even when we could see the Washington Monument clear as day and getting clearer by the block.

But when there was a detour, I ended up on a one-way street with the Monument in the rearview mirror, and she had Siri on in a heartbeat, pronouncing Holocaust Museum like a child sounding out a new word. It's like eyes, she said. It tells you what you can't see. Why not listen?

The parking lot was full of school buses, the museum crowded with middle school kids who flitted from one thing to another. "Those kids won't remember anything except what they had for lunch," Kathleen said, "but even

when things get worse, I'll remember all of those dead peoples' shoes they had piled up. Something like that will never go dark."

§

Two weeks ago, for my first turn, I took us two hundred miles another direction to Pittsburgh. "Absolutely no Siri," I said when we were on the Parkway East heading toward the city.

"Let's hope not. This isn't new like I want. We've been here a bunch of times already," she said, but when I turned at the Homestead exit, she sighed. "Well, ok, I haven't been here, but you know all this because you grew up just down the road."

"It's all new since I left. It's brand new for you."

The town was still there, but now even a number of churches were for sale, the businesses closed, the houses crumbling. When Kathleen went quiet, I wondered whether I'd picked a terrible place because she saw Homestead as an omen, all the old people who looked across the railroad tracks to where the world's largest steel mill had stood and were surprised the neighborhood they'd known had disappeared. Whether they were afraid to leave the town because everything else might have vanished as well, a kind of Shangri-La in reverse, everything in their lives aging while the rest of the world stayed new.

She complained when we sat in Eat 'n Park where there wasn't an item on the menu she'd never had before. "It's just eggs and toast and coffee," she said. "I'll be able to remember breakfast when I can't recognize our next-door neighbors."

I didn't say anything, but when we left, I had her look at the photographs on the wall in the lobby, the old black-and-whites that announced how enormous the mill was, how it once stood right where, once we were outside, I waved my arm around like a guide to show her how much was needed to fill its space. Apartments, condominiums, Target, Lowe's, Costco, Giant Eagle, a movie multiplex, franchise restaurants, and closest to the river, a waterslide park called Sandcastle. "That mill covered all of this," I said, standing beside a preserved, enormous steel beam and coil, memories so shiny and clean they looked as artificial as the perfect brick smokestacks outside the Longhorn Steakhouse.

"This feels like the future," Kathleen said.

"It's okay. You didn't live in Homestead."

"I'm not talking about the town. All it did was get old."

"Up the Ohio, in Aliquippa, nobody's even done anything except level the mill and cart everything away. There's nothing at all."

"I don't need to see that," she said.

The day after Homestead I had my cataracts appointment to keep. After my pupils were dilated, all I learned was that it would be another year before the doctor would think seriously about removal.

Kathleen drove us the eight miles home. Neither of us said a word about whether or not she'd be driving me after those cataracts were removed. It was so sunny, the world sparkled even when I squinted behind dark glasses, so I closed my eyes until the car turned left way before it was supposed to.

"A lot of traffic?" I said, my eyes still closed.

"A lot of stop signs."

I opened my eyes slightly and squinted. Stopped at an intersection, Kathleen was fumbling with her phone. "Where are we?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I've never been here before. I need to ask Siri." From behind us, a horn blew.

"Don't bother with that," I said. "Turn left again. And don't worry about that asshole."

Kathleen turned, and because we were facing away from the sun, I could make something out if I stayed squinted. "Turn left again," I said, and two

blocks later, “Now turn right.” Ahead of us was a sign directing us to turn right again to reach the road we always use.

“Thank God,” Kathleen said, and I closed my eyes again, keeping them shut when I felt us winding through the access ramp to the bridge a half mile from our street and even until we stopped in our driveway, doing what I could to calm her.

But when we were back inside our house, Kathleen began to cry. “Your clouds will go away,” she said. “Mine are getting thicker.” Her voice trailed off and then returned. “I hate self-pity, but I never thought I’d go crazy.”

“You’re not insane.”

“Yes, I am. I’m somebody else part of the time now. Like Eve, the three faces one, not the naked girl in the garden.”

“We watched that movie twenty years ago on television. Joanne Woodward was three sides of Eve.”

“Paul Newman’s wife,” she said. “I remember everything I don’t need to know.”

“All of it is important,” I said, but she looked as if she’d drifted, a vacancy in her expression that was more unsettling than an open-mouthed gasp of pain. She sat down on the couch, the movement slow and careful. Like the very old,

I thought. Like the fragile. When she settled, she looked at me and smiled as if I'd just entered the room. "Just think," she said. "I was always terrified of losing a breast."

§

It's turned out people buy those coats. "Because they're made of hope," Kathleen says, and for once I agree because Kathleen seems sharper when she's working with the coats, so much so, that when she's excited about them I'm able to think that every once in a long while, somebody comes back from the brink, a miracle that lets us believe we could be the ones who will be blessed like those passengers standing on the wings of the plane Sully landed on the Hudson River. Anything's possible, that makes us think. We might even pay attention to the "in case of a water landing" instructions before takeoff over the ocean.

Kathleen has always been one of those who listens to the flight attendant explain emergency responses, how the aisle has lights to guide us, how there are multiple exits, perhaps one close behind us. She always turns to check while I work the crossword puzzle in the airline magazine to calm my nerves and try to ignore that line about the seat cushion becoming a flotation device. Yet she doesn't believe in God, not one bit, even though he has a better chance

of existing than anybody who is part of a water landing in the middle of the ocean.

When I Google Sully, I find a miracle I remember from when we were first married. The pilot was young, the hatch blown open. It happened the week of our honeymoon when we hadn't watched television or read a newspaper. I locate the pilot's interview, how he admitted that he'd already thought about how he faced a lifetime of never having to be as skillful. Like an athlete, he said, like somebody who'd managed an extraordinary play that would never happen again.

§

When Kathleen picked Penn's Cave last week because it's only an hour's drive, I worried that the radius of our trips had already begun to shrink. She said it was because we'd ride on a boat way down inside it, that neither of us had even been in any kind of cave. She started Siri as soon as we got in the car.

In the cave she seemed fine, her gaze moving from stalactite to stalagmite like an ordinary tourist. Maybe, I thought, this thing will move slowly, we'll have a few more years of small failures before I need to master the behavior finality requires. Responses. Reactions. Readiness. A sort of three Rs for the return trip to elementary school. And beyond.

"Look at that," she said of a suggestive formation spotlighted by the guide. "It looks like a wall in God's wine cellar," and her ease into simile brought up a surge of joy into my throat.

"Or like the shelves in Satan's pub," I said, and Kathleen laughed like she always has, high–pitched and politely stifled to keep from bothering anyone in the boat.

§

At the grocery store this morning, Kathleen says, "Look there," and tugs me up beside her while she calls out "Hello."

"Well, hello there, you two," a woman says, and I recognize her—Annie from the photo shoot. She has nothing but produce in her small cart.

"You have one of my coats," Kathleen says. "I'd know that from a mile away."

"It's as good as advertised," Annie says.

"I'm glad you like it," Kathleen says, her expression so neutral I begin to sweat.

Annie glances at her kale and tomatoes, fixed on them. "You should know I've had a setback since the video. Thirteen good months. I have to think of them as a gift."

I wait for Kathleen to say there could be another gift, remission still possible even if temporary, but she says, “Gifts are always good.”

“There’s never enough,” Annie says, but Kathleen is already pushing our cart past her, and I am left to smile and shrug.

As soon as we turn into an aisle of frozen foods, Kathleen whispers, “I knew she was going to stop and talk, but I couldn’t remember who that was. And then she was gone, and her name came to me just now.”

This afternoon, preparing for a trip to the post office, Kathleen says, “I can’t find my keys.”

“Borrow mine. You don’t need them.”

“Yes, I do,” she says, suddenly angry. “You wouldn’t leave without your own keys.”

It takes ten minutes of eliminating places, including the laundry hamper and every couch and chair cushion before, in a rage, Kathleen flings open the refrigerator to retrieve the Brita pitcher and sees the keys lying on the shelf beneath it. “My God,” she says. “Oh, Jesus Christ.”

“I’ve left mine in worse places,” I say, but no particular location comes to me.

"Take these," she says, handing me the chilled keys. "You go. I can't. Not now."

And I do, saying nothing. I take my time with the package and the insurance, and when I get home, Kathleen's reading a book, composed.

"Promise me you won't be afraid of me," she says at once. "That you won't talk to me like you're a hostage."

"Don't worry," I say, but she closes her book and lays it on her lap as if she's embarrassed. "You know what terrifies me? That people will only remember who I'll be, that I'll stay like that for so long people will forget."

"I won't."

"Then tell people stories with places and people in them when they ask about me, not the funeral words like kind and generous."

§

Tonight, both of us in bed, Kathleen says, "I'm not in pain. Here I am, coming apart, and I don't even feel it inside."

"For sure, there's worse."

"No, there's not. Annie will be herself almost until the day she dies. I'll be something else for years and years. A zombie." She takes a breath and looks away.

"I've been reading that book that was made into a movie about the early-onset woman. She wanted to kill herself before she turned. Just like when somebody gets bitten in *The Walking Dead*."

"That's because those zombies are dangerous."

She turns away from me so fast, I shudder. "Do you think having me around won't kill you too?"

She lies facing away like that until I turn off the light. "Pick a place neither of us has ever seen before this time. Make sure I don't think I've forgotten something."

"I already did," I say. "You'll see. I won't say anything until we're almost there. Just trust me."

I shut up then, saying nothing about the miles-long stretch of abandoned Pennsylvania Turnpike I've read about, the no-longer-used tunnels you can walk through if you have the nerve and a reliable flashlight, tunnels that were closed in the late 1960s because they were only one lane wide each way on a four-lane expressway, tunnels that forced an alternate way over the mountains to be constructed.

And then she turns back to face me. "This will be the last time for driving," she says. "We need to begin going to the far-away," and I feel my body go hot.

The turnoff near Breezewood is right where the web site had promised it would be. For two hours, Kathleen has been silent, but now she sits up, expectant, but it's only a hundred yards or so before the road forks, and nothing I've read has given me a clue for making a choice.

"Left or right?" I say.

"There's no telling," Kathleen says. "What are we doing out here?" I swing to the left and start downhill on the quickly narrowing road, and she points out a No Trespassing sign. "We're in slasher movie territory," I say.

"Turn around," she says, and when I don't stop, she adds, "Now."

A quarter mile later, the forest thick on both sides and steeply falling away on our right, Kathleen nods toward a second, more ominous hand-painted No Trespassing sign. I begin to consider more realistic scenarios, all of them including vicious dogs and a recluse with an arsenal.

When I stop and make my first tiny swing, Kathleen, without my asking, gets out and signals how close I am to the ditch. She moves to the rear and waves me past where I was sure the shoulder ended. Then again. Then again, before she opens the door and climbs back in. "I still have the common sense in this family," she says. It feels good to see, two minutes later, an ordinary pickup truck appearing from the other road.

We follow that road a few miles, the active turnpike we've just left revealing itself to our right. Shortly after it vanishes, I spy, through the forest to our left, what looks to be the abandoned road. A hundred yards later, there is a small parking area empty of cars. "There's a lost turnpike right over there," I say. "Miles of it, and lost tunnels, too, because they used old one-lane railroad tunnels instead of building new ones here."

"So, we're hiking where we've never been?" Kathleen says. "On a closed road?" She reaches into the back seat and produces two of her cancer coats. "It's not as warm as you think," she says. "Not if we're out in the woods like this." When she places one in my hands, she says, "Something brand new for you. Maybe this will help you appreciate how lucky you are not being hooked up to that poison at the center."

What looks like a path is so over grown I suspect we're parked in the wrong place for exploring, but Kathleen takes the lead as if she's in a hurry, so sure-footed I feel myself aging as I struggle. "Creepy," Kathleen says, when we stand on what once had been a heavily-traveled road, and I have to agree. Except for the pickup truck, we haven't seen anyone for so long it feels as if we've entered an alternate, uninhabited world. Or worse, and more likely, one so

isolated and forgotten that whoever might show up wouldn't be someone we'd welcome.

"There's bears here, I bet," she says.

"We're in the open. We'll see anything a long way off."

"And everything will see us first."

"This is the Fordlandia of Pennsylvania," I say.

"And that means what?"

"Ford built a model town in the Amazon jungle way back when without listening to anybody who knew better. It's a ruin now, mostly, like this."

"It's not the same at all. This got left behind because the rest of the road worked so well they needed more lanes." "In another forty years, when cars are obsolete, the whole turnpike will be like this."

Kathleen frowns. "Nothing's easier than predicting the future for a time when you're dead."

The asphalt is crumbling. The familiar milkweed, goldenrod, and burdock are waist high where cars once traveled. A few sumac trees ten feet tall are accelerating the split in the pavement. As far as we can see in either direction there is no one, and yet we are standing in the middle of what had once been

the busiest highway in Pennsylvania. “Even the bears are gone,” I say, but Kathleen doesn’t smile.

“My father drove us through the tunnels one Sunday afternoon after he heard they were closing. I was a freshman in college and he made me get in the car. ‘Once in a lifetime,’ he said. Turns out he was right.”

“So, you cheated,” Kathleen says. “You’ve seen this before.”

“It’s totally different.”

Kathleen squints in both directions and turns as if she’s going back to the car. “I pick Iceland for our next trip.”

“What?”

“I want to go to Iceland. It has volcanoes and hot springs and everything absolutely new.”

“It’s October. I thought you’d pick some place tropical,” I say. “You’ve always wanted to live where it’s warmer.”

“Either you don’t get it, or you don’t care. We’ve been in warm places in winter, but we’ve never been anywhere at any time of year like Iceland.”

“We’ve never been any place like this road,” I say. “This is the world without us.”

"No, it isn't," Kathleen says. "The real turnpike will still be up and running and the same as ever."

"I mean none of us. None of us."

"You can't think that way. There's nothing but darkness there."

"I think of it every day."

"That's so selfish. Just because you'll be dead, you want everybody to be dead," Kathleen says. "You don't have any empathy."

"When it's earned, I do."

"There," Kathleen says. "And you don't even realize." She begins to cry. I think of embracing her, but now the gesture would seem as if I were reacting to her accusation.

She uses her little fingers to wipe the corners of her eyes. "I remembered something just now," she says. "From a long time ago. What my mother said about my father when I asked her about his racism, how he used all the worst words for everybody who wasn't white—'Otherwise, a good man.'" Her eyes focus on where the overgrown path begins as if she doesn't expect me to speak. "Have you had enough," she says.

"I want to see inside the tunnel," I say. "It's like not seeing the Mona Lisa if you go to the Louvre."

"You go. I already know what a mess looks like. I'll sit in the car and read."

"I thought you were nervous."

"The doors will be locked. The bears don't have a key."

"Fifteen minutes?"

"Twenty," she says. "Take your time." Her voice is as distant as the active turnpike's traffic noise. "If you didn't have your cataracts, you could see the tunnel to the east of here from where we're standing, and I'll be hunkered down so far the boogie man will think we're both looking inside that tunnel."

"Twenty minutes," I say.

"But first follow me back to the car and let's get you a flashlight. You'll need one or else you won't see anything but a postcard."

§

The tunnel, it turns out, is less than two hundred yards away. Close enough to start jogging after a hundred yards, the asphalt broken and crushed into near-sand, easier on my knees than if it were new. The trees aren't yet in full color, but the sumac that has pushed up through cracks in the highway has already nearly finished dropping its red leaves, mixing with a scattering of maples and locust.

The entrance is so crowded with graffiti that ranges from romantic to violent that I think it's been years since anyone found room there to declare their love or hate. Once inside, I can see a light in the distance just like I'd read about in a blog. Ambient, the blogger had said, something like that, because it couldn't possibly be the real light from the other end a mile away.

I flick on the flashlight, but it doesn't have the same effect as headlights on a car. The light doesn't penetrate more than a step or two in front of me, and when I focus it on the ground, looking down at my feet, I feel light-headed from my hundred-yard jog.

Cataracts don't matter here. The surface is so haphazardly littered, everybody needs to be cautious.

In less than a minute, as my light begins to dim and flicker, I wonder how long the batteries have been in a flashlight Kathleen and I use maybe twice a year. As it goes out, I remind myself the tunnel is wide and straight. All I have to do is not panic like I've done every time I've played blind on my sidewalk or on my stairs since the cataract diagnosis. Take ten steps forward, I think. Prove something to yourself, then turn around and go back to Kathleen.

I only stumble twice, but my breath turns labored. Ok, I think, there you are, and then I turn, my right shoulder glancing off the wall. Startled, I twist

away from contact, one shoe stepping on a bottle, and I fall, the flashlight smacking against the road and tumbling into silence.

I lie on the asphalt for a few seconds, evaluating. None of my pain feels excruciating. I sit up, and then stand, staggering for a moment, pivoting to take the weight off my left knee, which flares into a pain not quite incapacitating. "Ok," I say aloud, "you can walk." Though my right wrist aches as well, and I sense a throbbing begin in my shoulders and neck.

Knowing I'd struck the wall to my right, I reach with my right arm but touch nothing. I sidestep twice and then a third time before I touch something solid. And though I know it's impossible, I consider the chance that I might set out in the wrong direction. I remember the flashlight flung into the darkness, but I don't want to spend time bent over and feeling around.

I hear voices, but don't see any lights. Who would be coming through in the dark? Teenagers? Kids drinking from six packs and tossing their empties? I expect the sound of cans clanging off the walls followed by laughter. I limp more quickly toward the light. The voices go quiet and then, after a few more steps, I hear them again, not any closer, but one of them a child's.

A light comes on behind me, and the child's voice squeals. Not for seeing me, I decide, pushing myself. It seems important not to be overtaken by a child

and whoever is with her. A father most likely, a man who would, by now, be keeping an eye on me, measuring his steps so there was always some distance between us. Someone who might have questions for me once we were out of the tunnel. But after I limp a few steps away from the tunnel and look back, no one is visible.

§

I expect to see nothing changed at the car, but there are two red canvas folding chairs sitting beside it. Good, I think, nothing has spooked her. She's inside watching me limping and will ask where the flashlight is, and I'll tell the story. She'll tell me she put the chairs out so we could sit in the sun a few minutes and how absorbed she was in the book, the multi-volume *My Life* or whatever it was called that Kathleen had started a year ago. She'd finished three volumes, coming back to the epic for an hour each night before sleep, as if it were literary warm milk, maybe only the one volume left to finish. Though who knew how many more that long-winded Norwegian would put out.

The book is lying open on a chair, the pages flapping in the wind, but Kathleen is gone. I stare in every direction, and then sweep the edge of the forest a second time before I open the door and blow the horn.

Before I move or call, she reappears a hundred feet away, stepping out of the trees nearest the active turnpike. “I had to pee so bad,” she calls out as she gets closer. “There was no holding it another minute. It was like the old days at a keg party when the girls would circle up in the woods and you’d squat in the middle. But I got turned around in there far enough to feel safe and walked off the wrong way somehow.”

“Jesus, this isn’t the county park.”

“But here I am right back where I started. You made such a racket with that horn. You could have called my name.”

“The horn’s louder.”

She picks up the book. “I lost my place now with all the ruckus.” She closes the book and opens it again. “You were gone forever. Wherever did you go?”

“The tunnel. You said it wasn’t far.”

“Did I now?”

“I’d be gone twenty minutes, tops. That’s why you were alone in the car.”

“And nearly peed my pants. What kind of tunnel is way out here?”

A truck horn wails through the trees. In the winter, I think, you could see the traffic from here. And maybe you could be seen from the highway. “I’ll

buy us tickets tomorrow," I say in what I hope is a jaunty voice. "We'll be on our way to Iceland before it gets too cold there."

"Iceland? Whatever for? It's so far." The locust buzz of my tinnitus is so insistent that I have to fight off the urge to turn around once to look behind me, afraid that I can't hear what might be coming. "Whatever are you talking about?" Kathleen says, but her voice, now, is anxious, her face tightening. I give her time. "Wherever have you been?" she says at last. "That coat is scuffed along the arm. Did you have some trouble?"

"Yes," I say, and hold my breath as if the sound of it might attract something terrible.

"You didn't have to go so far into the woods to pee. There's nobody here."

She looks down at the book as if she's reading from whatever page it's open to. "Or did you have to do more than pee and you couldn't find a good spot?" She pats one of the red chairs. "You look like you could use a rest," she says, and without speaking, I examine her expression.

"Maybe a short one."

"Maybe? I was sitting out here so long I felt like a widow."

"Iceland," I say again. "Volcanoes and hot springs and a world of difference."

Kathleen closes the book and blinks. “Oh, wow,” she says. “Oh, just wow, oh wow. For a minute there, I forgot myself.” She pats the chair again and says, “Sit.”

For a moment, I feel afraid that she’s turned a corner into a new level of darkness, and I feel calmer than I have for weeks, maybe longer, a calmness that seems to come from finality, one more thing I won’t be able to explain to her, how, when what I’d feared had finally occurred, I relaxed.

“You were right,” she says, “not one person came by. The world without us isn’t so bad, is it?” She sweeps one arm in an arc, inviting me to take in the landscape.

“I twisted my ankle and wrenched my knee,” I say. “It took me forever to make my way back.”

“But now you’re here,” she says. “Tell me everything. Tell me what you saw.”

Gary Fincke's latest collection is The Out-of-Sorts: New and Selected Stories (West Virginia, 2017). His next collection, The Sorrows, will be published in early 2020 by Stephen F. Austin University Press.